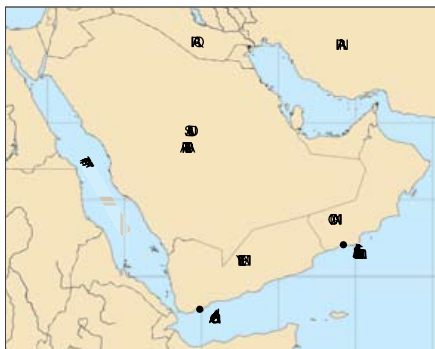


SAVE US FROM OURSELVES —

Our recent experience 'convoying' through the Gulf of Aden's famous Pirate Alley turned out to be one of the most difficult passages we've made since we left Sausalito 3 1/2 years ago aboard our Pacific Seacraft 40 *DreamKeeper* — not so much because of the pirates, but because of the challenges of traveling



within a large convoy of cruisers.

This year many boats have transited Pirate Alley from Salalah, Oman, to Aden, Yemen. Some of them went alone, while others traveled in small convoys of 3 to 7 boats. There were two large convoys of 20 or more boats. We were part of the second one, consisting of 20 boats. As far as we know via the coconut telegraph, all who attempted the 600-mile transit made it through safely this season.

We made the choice to be part of a large convoy because of the added support and possible truth to the notion of "safety in numbers," and also to ease the fears of our worried families and friends. In addition, the Coalition Forces that patrol these waters were highly supportive of our strategy and offered to closely monitor our group as we traveled.

We had never participated in a rally before, as we prefer to be off exploring and passage-making on our own. But looking back, even with all the drama, challenges, and frustrations, we're still happy we did it. And now we have another good story to tell.

Day 1, March 4; Distance to Aden, Yemen: 569 miles

The radio crackles: "Delta 1, this is Alpha 1, what's your ETD?"

We were designated Delta 1, leaders of the Delta group, which was at the back of the pack. We left under cloudy skies at 09:48, traveling in a closely packed formation with four other boats at our flanks and astern. There were four groups of five traveling in diamond formation. Conversations with one of

the American boats in our group went something like this:

Delta 4: "Delta Force leader this is Delta 4."

"Go ahead Delta 4," my husband Gar answers.

"How do you want our ranks?"

"It would be great if everyone could tighten up once people get sorted with their sails," Gar advises. As you can imagine, five boats turning into the wind to raise sails in tight quarters is quite a challenge.

Delta 4: "Can I call you Chuck Norris?"

Gar: "If you must."

This is only the beginning, but we can tell we'll have some quality quotes by the end of the five-day trip. We've just started and some of the other boats are already annoyed with the American chatter coming mostly from the Delta Group. We are supposed to maintain radio silence, which is clearly going to be a challenge.

Our convoy plan is to travel within about a half mile from each of the big groups during daylight, with a mile of separation at night. Initially, there is no wind and glassy seas so staying in formations isn't too difficult. It is really hot. We sail through a huge pod of dolphins at around 1300 hours and later motor through a big pod of pilot whales. Their fins are huge as they slice through the water.

When their outboards stop working only hours out of Salalah harbor, our friends — a group of young Brits on a small catamaran called *Bravo 3* — have to return to port to exchange 740 liters of fuel because they discover it is diesel. The whole convoy agrees to slow down at night so they can catch up by morning.

Day 2; Distance to Aden: 475 miles

The VHF crackles to life again. "Delta 1 this is Delta 5, I think you are in danger of being overtaken by your group."

It's 0513 and still dark. We run only with deck lights aft and stern, no mast lights, to avoid being seen at long distances. I can see green and white, and red and white lights coming directly up our stern. It's tricky. We're supposed to stay .5 miles behind Alpha 1, the lead group, and .25 from the Bravo and Charlie groups on our flanks. Controlling speed and course is challenging to say the least with 20 boats traveling at various speeds. We relay our course and speed changes to our group as they

occur, but quickly realize that we have a tough job — one of the most difficult in the convoy — because we are in the middle of the convoy and need to monitor all three other groups, as well as our own.

At 0013 a large wooden *dhow* fishing boat cruises quickly through our convoy, uncomfortably close. As they pass I can smell the stink of animals on the wind. It's a bit eerie out here: no wind, the sea is almost reflective, the sky shimmering silver and a light peach sun hangs above us. Our British friends with the fuel issue reconnect with us at sunrise.

Everyone listening to us must be chuckling. Delta 4 and Delta 5 are at it again, as they have been since arriving at Salalah. As luck would have it, they got placed next to each other in the convoy. Being the Delta group leader, we often have to intervene as they bicker over their speed and position. I think it might be a game for them now, because they're more amiable this morning.

This afternoon Gar gives the fleet something to talk about. We are being pinched on both sides by both the Bravo and Charlie groups. Talking through it on the radio with the group we try to problem solve so we can slip back in.



ALL PHOTOS DREAMKEEPER

CONVOYING THROUGH PIRATE ALLEY

Anyone who knows Gar knows that people who seem selfish and stubborn rub him the wrong way. Well, he gets rubbed, takes the bait and loses his cool, playing the ugly American card, while the guy who opposes him plays the pompous British sailor. Things eventually cool down, though, and they both apologize. After a lengthy discussion about "cross track error" we return to our proper position within the fleet.

At one point a huge school of dolphins crosses our bow. Also, super cool and really comforting, the Coalition Forces who have been tracking our progress send out an Australian chopper for a fly-by which cruises low and circles around all of the boats. It's good to know they're watching out for us.

Day 3; Distance to Aden: 376 miles

Gar's quote of the day: "You know, this convoy thing is really pretty smart." This after four small fishing boats come over the horizon around 0700. Then later, nine larger fishing boats come cruising through our fleet so close we can wave at the fishermen and see the expressions on their faces. We decided before that with the first arrival of fishing boats we would practice our defense

tactics. So we go through the exercise, practice for pirates, tighten ranks and close in on Alpha.

We learn a lot of things. The most obvious is that the slowest boat should not be in the back. A Kiwi boat in our group, Delta 4, is the slowest boat. For defense formation to work, our group has to wait for all of our five boats to close together before we move forward and tighten up with the other groups. It takes us 11 minutes to tighten up and head toward Alpha group. Way too long.

What to do? The only real solution is to move Delta 4 up in front to the Alpha Group. The problem is that the groups were organized in order of convoy sign-up date. All the members of Delta signed up last. We're at the back of the pack and playfully referred to as "pirate bait." No one wants to switch and come back with Delta except one thoughtful boat in Charlie, but it still wouldn't really solve the problem, so now Delta 4 is up with the Alphas and we have one less boat to manage. We are now traveling in a diamond formation with only 4 boats in

Delta.

There is never a dull moment in this convoy.

Alpha 1, our convoy leader, calls for an engine check stop for 10 minutes. Most of us have been motorsailing most of the way. All boats stopped in formation except one. A Delta rogue, Delta 3.

They are now positioned directly behind our stern and with a tighter forma-

We're at the back of the pack and playfully referred to as "pirate bait."

tion. You can probably guess what happens. Gar was down below checking the engine and I was resting in the sea-berth. When Gar climbs back into the cockpit 5 minutes later, Delta 3 is within a boat length away on our port side motoring full speed ahead at 6 knots with no one at the helm. They just pass us right by as we all were dead in the water. Unbelievable! They don't even have their VHF on and aren't keeping watch. We're lucky. To their credit, at least they apologize later.

We are exhausted. Managing this group is a constant job. It's almost ridiculous. Seriously, I go to the head with the handheld VHF. Standing watch is like being in a live video game; watching the boats around me, managing our track, and looking for ships and boats on the radar and the horizon.

Nevertheless we still feel as if we wouldn't really want to do it any other way. Hopefully it will be worth it. We both have backaches, more grey hair, and bags under our eyes. The sky is a hazy shade of blue and the sun is bursting through. It's hot, but it's good to see some brightness in our days. Terns, gulls, and booby birds feed on the surface and Sargasso weed floats by.

Day 4; Distance to Aden: 244 miles

"Bravo 5, Bravo 5, Do you copy? This is Delta 1." In the middle of the night, at 0100, I call out on the VHF over and over. "Alpha 6, this is Delta 1, Looks like we have a sleeper coming our way." "Roger, Thanks Delta 1, let's watch him closely so we don't get run over."

Bravo 5 appears to have fallen asleep on watch and gone off course. We were already within a quarter mile of them before they peeled out of their convoy and started heading towards us. Nice.

Alpha 6 and I continue to try to hail them on the VHF to no avail. When they are within shouting distance of us, right between both of our boats, we pull out our signal horns and blast them. It



Deemed the Chuck Norris of Delta group, Gar would look like a tough hombre to pirates, if it weren't for the bathtub toy on his wheel.



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works. They wake up, groggily respond on the VHF that they weren't asleep — yeah, right — and silently slither back to their group with no apology. Everyone is tired, but some boats have really been negligent about keeping good watches and keeping their VHF radios on.

Another hour goes by, but the excitement never ends. At 0200, a fishing boat that's heading our way is spotted on radar by the fleet. It looks to be a traditional *dhow* closing in fast at about 10 knots. The chatter goes around the VHF for everyone to pay close attention and get ready to get out of the way, if possible. The boat approaches Alpha 5 on the upper right triangle of our convoy still going 10 knots. Everyone holds their breath; the VHF is totally silent. All of a sudden it turns south and begins crossing just off the bows of the Alpha Group lead boats, almost close enough to touch their bows while still doing almost 10 knots. Remember, this is the middle of the night during a new moon. It's pitch black out. The Alpha Group slows down fast and barely misses the fishing boat, then the *dhow* turns and runs down the width of the convoy along the port side of Bravo Group.

Bravo Group collapses in towards the middle of the convoy attempting to avoid the *dhow*, and a couple of the Bravo boats come within a few hundred feet of us. I maneuver with one eye fixed on their green and red running lights and one fixed on the radar screen. There's a lot of confusion. Then I notice a sailboat from the Alpha Group, Alpha 2, on the radar doing a 180, then heading after the *dhow*. It just misses Bravo 1, the Bravo group leader, and looks totally out of control.

Alpha 2 finally stops, does another 180 and heads back in the right direction. What happened was he had to wake his crew to take the helm while

Even in broad daylight it was nerveracking to have local boats pass so closely to the fleet. Were they pirates or simply fishermen?



he dealt with an emergency VHF call down below from a Coalition boat. His crew, still asleep and hand-steering, got disoriented by the *dhow*, thought it was Alpha 1, and pulled out of the convoy to follow it. Half asleep, the helmsman didn't realize what was going on until he or she almost collided with Bravo 1. Meanwhile, the *dhow* speeds away into the darkness, her crew apparently hav-

All of a sudden it turns south and begins crossing just off the bows of the Alpha Group lead boats.

ing no idea what kind of chaos they just created. Or do they?

The convoy's leader is a Dutch boat named *Hafskip*. Joost, the 32 year old captain, has really been doing a great job trying to manage this lot. There are a few other Dutch boats, a boat from Belgium, a few French boats, some Kiwi boats, and the rest are British or American. We're all very different sizes and types, ranging from a 32-ft monohull to a 65-ft catamaran. All of us have 2 to 3 people on board; there are no singlehanders.

The boats with three definitely have it easier considering the amount of intensity directed toward keeping a tight course and very attentive watches.

This morning there's another shift in the ranks. Charlie 2, an American boat, asks permission from his group leader and Alpha 1 to change to our group, Delta. He's been having trouble with Charlie 1, the group leader, for days. The Charlie Group has a tendency to wander all over the place, sometimes drifting miles away from the convoy and sometimes traveling much slower. The group leader almost always thinks he is in the right place.

As you can imagine, this creates some frustration and anger.

So now the Delta group is back to 5, all the Yankees are in the same group, as our slow Kiwi boat has moved up into Alpha. Funny? Put all the loud Americans in the back of the pack. Our new addition is one of the most talkative in the convoy over the VHF.

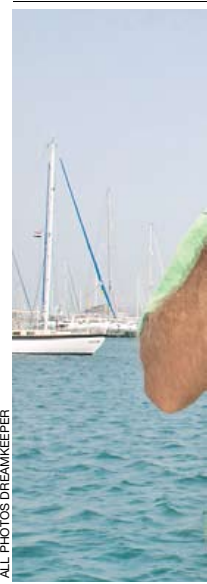
We are only two days out from Aden, but now we're in the infamous stretch called Pirate Alley where most of the commercial ship hijackings happen. Even though only one sailing yacht has been taken in this area during the last two years, commercial boats and tankers are chased, and often boarded, weekly by the Somalia pirates.

The Coalition convoy is closely monitoring us, but they are also watching and patrolling the "corridor" just south of us. The corridor is a U.N.-patrolled shipping lane where all the commercial tankers and cargo ships transit to and from the Red Sea. Right now on our AIS display, I can see 35 vessels, from 40 to 200 miles away. Just 50 miles south of us at this very moment I can see a commercial/tanker ship convoy in tight formation, just as we all are here. There are 23 ships from 400 feet to 1,000 feet long right next to each other traveling at 11 knots. Most likely they also have the protection of a battleship or some sort of security force, unlike us. We are now officially in the "high risk" zone.

The winds have come and we now have 15 knots right on our tails with the seas picking up to 2 to 4 feet. It's roly — really roly. The direction of the wind and waves is all wrong for us little sailboats who have to maintain a specific speed and exact position. Stuff is slamming around in all the cupboards and I'm starting to get seasick trying to write this. Overall, however, we're holding up okay. Everyone in the convoy is tired and definitely anxious, but we are hanging in there, happy to be nearing the end of this, and grateful for our continued safe passage so far.

Day 5; Distance to Aden: 130 miles

I wake up in the middle of the night to the startling blast of our horn and



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CONVOYING THROUGH PIRATE ALLEY



Greatly relieved that their long ordeal is over. Gar and Nicole strike a pose in the Aden anchorage. It's a long way from Sausalito.

the boat pulling hard to port. I lurch up the stairs and hear Gar reporting on the VHF that an Alpha group boat is coming head-on through our fleet. Gar is shaking, scared, angry, and confused. It becomes clear that a boat from Alpha turned into the fleet to raise his mainsail without notifying the fleet or turning on a masthead light, deck lights or spreader lights. This is a totally dangerous and completely negligent move to make in the middle of the fleet in pitch-black conditions.

We too would like to sail but we signed on to go at convoy speed without compromising our maneuverability with sails. Once again, a very near miss. He was seriously only feet from our starboard side. That makes three near misses for us so far in five days.

Everyone is rattled. There have been too many close calls. Gar is trying to identify the boat so they know what they have done and so they don't hit someone else.

Once the boat is identified, Delta 5 starts swearing insults at the "crazy Frenchman." I am embarrassed by Delta 5's response, but also appalled at the selfishness I have seen out here. Close calls make everything more intense. I'm happy to be alive and in love. The culprit won't take responsibility nor apologize. Another night on edge.

Our eyes are acutely sharp as we watch the entire fleet's movements

closely. We monitor real time with our eyes, the radar, and chartplotter. Gar is clearly freaked out. He asks the Delta fleet to give him space, a lot of it. Delta 4 who likes to be really close understands, and respectfully agrees to a minimum of 800 feet from our stern. At last, they are far enough away.

I slip back into bed, wrapping myself up in my sheet and blanket like a burrito and try to calm down. I'm grateful for another two hours where I don't have to be responsible for our group and what happens in it. But sleep doesn't come. My heart is racing; my stomach is in knots and I'm dreading another night of this. Also, our instruments went out again yesterday afternoon for a couple of hours so my hearing is acutely focused, listening for the alarm that beeps when they go out. Gar has been on watch for over 13 hours, as he wanted to monitor the instruments.

Most of my watch is quiet. I came on at 2200 as the Big Dipper climbed higher while the Southern Cross sat on our port side. I'm trying to hold our position in the fleet, but Charlie has slipped back again and Bravo is still behind us. My watch gets trickier. I now have to watch Alpha in front and the Bravo and Charlie Group, in addition to the rest of Delta group from behind.

Yesterday when Charlie 5's engine went out, some heartening things happened. (She's a big 30-ton monohull.) The convoy slowed way down in to give Charlie 5's crew time to fix their

engine. The conditions were terribly uncomfortable for traveling under reduced sails. We were making 2 knots in 3-foot swells and 16 to 20 knots of wind. We were pitching and rolling so badly that Delta 5 called to tell me I might as well could do my laundry — we were in the agitation cycle.

Surprisingly, everyone in the fleet slowed down and waited. Almost no one complained as we all moved very slowly for hours despite the fact that our Tuesday arrival seemed to be slowly slipping away. Finally, Charlie 5 got the engine fixed but then it faltered again. Selflessly, Bravo 1 volunteered to give them a tow. Towing can at times be very hard on the tow boat. By nightfall, Charlie 5 agreed to take a tow. This selfless act, gives me hope in humanity and this convoy.

Two hours into my watch I see a boat from Alpha 1 move across the fleet and out to starboard well away from everyone. Thankfully, they are moving out rather than towards the fleet. Two hours later the boat is still falling behind. At 0235, four and a half hours into my watch, Delta 5 contacts me asking about the boat that is just crossing his bow and coming my way. The Charlie boat was out of his formation and coming into our Delta convoy, very close to Delta 5.

It all happened too fast. I made contact but Delta 5 jumped in: "I don't care about what's best for your sail angle or your speed, You are in my space, you cut across my bow. What's wrong with you, you fucking crazy Frenchman. . ." I was seething, my heart was racing. I'm embarrassed by Delta 5's attack on

When a Coalition helicopter surveyed the fleet from above, it gave everyone a much-needed boost of confidence.



SAVE US FROM OURSELVES

another nationality — Delta is now definitely the Asshole American group — but also pissed that this captain thought that because he was "in control" of his own yacht, and a professional skipper with thousands of miles of experience, it was okay for him to maneuver within hundreds of feet of our group, and risking a possible collision.

It is amazing to us how different people are in this convoy. Some are selfless and completely willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the group and others are selfish and continually want to do what's best for themselves. Thankfully this afternoon we have a nice wind and are motorsailing comfortably. Our Tuesday arrival is most definitely within reach now.

The air is crisp and clean. A little bird has visited three boats in the Delta fleet and has put a smile on everyone's face. The radio in our large fleet is refreshingly silent for a change and we hear no talk of pirate attacks by the warships in our area. If all goes well for the next 24-30 hours, we will soon be safely in Aden and will likely have become our own worst enemies in these waters.

Day 6 and it's all over

We're 15 miles out of Aden when the stepped desert cliffs materialize out of the dusty haze. Crumbly stucco and

We can't really believe we are here. We have survived Pirate Alley.

whitewashed dwellings are perched on the cliffs. A sandy tongue of sand slithers through the valley between two peaks, lapping at the sea with the look of an Arabian glacier. A big fish launches out of the water and brown booby birds do fly-bys.

Our convoy leader, Joost, aka Alpha 1, gives his final talk on the VHF, congratulating our group and we all thank him for his valiant effort in making this all happen. He did an amazing job and I am sure he is just as exhausted as we are.

The last 10 miles we take turns calling Aden port control to tell them our

boat details, then finally dismantle the groups and follow each other into the harbor in single file. We take the back. We know the anchoring will be chaotic and we are happy to just chill out at last and take in our surroundings. I turn off the VHF and don't plan on turning it on again for days. It's been non-stop and I am exhausted by it.

We can't really believe we are here. We have survived Pirate Alley. But I don't feel the "I am so psyched" feeling I get after certain accomplishments. More like, "I am so fucking glad that is over!"

This convoy thing was no easy task. We recognize the effort that it took for everyone to stick it out and stay together. Most people were tense, nervous, frustrated, and exhausted more than once. Yet, everyone chose to follow the pack, try to communicate, and stick together.

Thankfully, we never saw nor heard of any pirate attacks on our route. Did pirates see us? Were they deterred from attacking us by our convoy? We'll never know, but we do know that we made it safe and sound.

"Delta 1, over and out."

— nicole friend & gar duke



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